Talk With Vance Packard

By LEWIS NICHOLS

FOR a man who tosses around enough weight to have added at least two phrases to the language—"hidden persuaders" and "status seekers" certainly, and "pyramid climbers" possibly—Vance Packard at first glance can be a little disconcerting.

He is of medium height, medium age, talks slowly, loses the thread of what he is saying, regains it, acts on the whole like a professor at a small college a little unsure of tenure and with an important lecture coming up with the president in attendance. At the typewriter he is something else again. At the typewriter he is the cold-eyed professional—ex-news-service feature writer, magazine writer, the head of the house, trained to support same by his freelance wits.

He lives in a large house in New Canaan, Conn., in the section adjacent to Wilton and Norwalk. Here the two faces of Vance Packard can be seen in fine perspective. A large studio room had too high a ceiling, so some years back, having written about the pleasures of do-it-yourself, he decided to lower it by four feet. There ensued a terrifying saga of ladders that buckled beneath him and electric saws that gnawed at his legs. It is a fine looking false ceiling today, but the attitude of all the Packards, including the carpenter himself, is one of bemused wonder that the old codger had been able to do it.

No one wonders what goes on near the typewriter, however; and no ladders buckle there. Although the research papers and notes that go to make up each book may seem strewn about helter-skelter, they are not. For a book jammed with facts and with source material on thousands of pieces of paper, the author can go with the directness of an electric eye to anything he needs. And when the book has been finished, the essential ingredients go into a steel safe (this came with the house) or are filed away carefully in a couple of storerooms. There is nothing vague about this side of Vance Packard.

"I've made myself a sort of beat," he said the other day. "It's to follow the matter of how all the changes that go on about us affect the individual. I suppose I started it in college (Penn State), when I did a piece about the status of the trees and their effect. In newspaper work I quickly got into feature writing and spent four years with The Associated Press mainly pulling together trends. As I became a magazine writer, I got the specialty of social sciences and human behavior.

"As a magazine writer I kept files of hundreds of ideas for articles, and I do this still, for books. There probably are 60 or 70 ideas for books. In the case of 'The Naked Society,' the

Vance Packard.

publishers (McKay) and I kicked the idea around for upward a year. Their original idea was a book about investigators. As I began clipping and filing, the stuff about questionnaires for gas-station attendants and personnel testing began to grow larger, and the growing obscurity about just when does an arrest begin. Two years ago we signed the contract to discuss privacy.

"I'm a great one for lying down, spend two or three hours a day in bed—reading, clipping. When I started active work on the book, I talked for several days with a private eye, an orientation course on the whole general field of investigation and privacy. At the end I had a guy checking various odds and ends. Beyond that the research was done by my family and myself. In interviews, I tell the subjects I'll send any direct quotations to them, for their checking on accuracy, and if they wish, I'll eliminate their names. It's the information I'm after, not the names.

"The least researched of my books—'The Hidden Persuaders'—I tried talking off in sequence to a tape recorder. This made me uncomfortable. Now I put the information into a series of piles of what may end as chapters and do them one at a time. They're not written the way you would magazine pieces, though, each an entity in itself. There's no conclusion to each chapter, winding it up—the impact is supposed to come from the whole book."